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ABSTRACT

This study examined ethnic minority students' reported learning strategies and how they used them to accommodate their perceived learning styles in relation to their educational and occupational goals. The experiences and perceptions of 129 (62 male, 57 female) Montreal (Canada) born grade 11 students of ethnic origin, whose mother-tongue and sociocultural background were other than English or French were surveyed. Eighty-two percent of the students revealed a learning profile of field independence, 77 percent had a low tolerance for experiences divergent from reality, 89 percent used reflection; 91 percent claimed high task persistence, 86 percent reported high anxiety regarding difficult tasks, and 81 percent accepted personal responsibility for success and failure. A majority felt that the teaching style of their teachers was not a match with their individual learning styles and a majority saw this as a reflection of cultural values. The results suggest that the apparent misalignment of teaching and learning styles and the absence of effective learning skills compromised optimal learning and the realization of aspirations by minority students. (Contains nine references.) (JLS)

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# LEARNING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES:

# PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS

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# LEARNING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES:

# PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic minority students' perceived learning styles accomodated by learning strategies in relation to educational and occupational aspirations as influenced by the home and school was the focus of this study for the purpose of examining their evaluations of learning experiences and the decision-making process to pursue higher studies. The results show that the apparent misalignment of teaching and learning styles and the absence of effective learning skills seriously compromise optimal learning and the realization of aspirations.

## INTRODUCTION

This inquiry focused on ethnic minority students' reported learning strategies to accomodate their perceived learning style in relation to educational and occupational aspirations. The purpose of the study was to examine the general learning behaviour of ethnic minority students and the decision-making process to pursue or abandon higher studies with respect to socio-cultural and educational demands made on them by exploring their evaluations of outcomes arising out of experiences with the application of learning strategies to accomodate their perceived learning style for schoolwork and career planning in view of the cultural influence of the home and school.

In essence, the phenomenon of diversity in the classroom is manifested not only in the cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds that students bring to school but also in generalized patterns of response to the instructional environment termed learning styles (Hernandez, 1989). Learning styles are influenced and determined by many of the same elements associated with personality development in that learning styles reflect and are one manifestation of individuals' personality. Personality development in a multicultural society involves the interaction of social, ecological, cultural, personal, and behavioural elements (Garza and Lipton, 1982). Furthermore, personality development relates to affective and cognitive factors, perceptions, aptitudes and abilities; multicultural systems with inherent cultural, social, and environmental influences; and observable behaviours represented through cultural expressions.

Learning styles refer to the characteristic manner in which individuals respond to the instructional environment (Collier and Hoover, 1987), and are consistent patterns of behaviour defined in terms of cognitive, affective and physiological dimensions as to information-processing and responses to affective, sensory, and environmental dimensions of the instructional process (Cornett, 1983). In this regard, the role and the effect of the instructional environment on the learning styles of students relates to teacher involvement in introducing, teaching, and monitoring learning strategies for the purpose of optimal educational outcomes (Kandarakis, 1995). The utilization of learning strategies not only influence how students approach academic learning but also interpersonal problem-solving situations (Meyers and Lytle, 1986).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework applying to this study was developed by Smolicz and Secombe (1981), for analysis of qualitative data within a socio-cultural paradigm. Individuals are viewed as social beings who interpret social reality from a personal perspective and whose social interactions have a basis in a cultural network of ideas and principles which operate to define values, and norms of conduct. Moreover, with respect to humanistic principles as adhered to by the conceptual framework, qualitative data obtained by way of detailed accounts may extract cultural perspectives on educational aspirations. This possibility of expression of socio-cultural attitudes and values facilitated

the examination of the general learning behaviour of ethnic minority students and the decision-making process regarding their subsequent pursuit of higher education. The participants of this study were considered as the source for understanding not only the general process of education, but the effect of intervening home and school variables as competing cultural value systems espoused as a function of the context of a multicultural society. The responses therefore, represent experiences comprising reality from the participants' perspective relating to the application of learning strategies to accomodate their perceived learning style for successful educational outcomes and future considerations.

## METHOD

The experiences and perceptions of 129 (62 male, 57 female) Montréal born grade 11 students of ethnic origin, whose mother-tongue and socio-cultural background was other than English or French, attending a comprehensive high school that offered instruction in English served by the Commission des Écoles Catholiques de Montréal were recorded by way of a questionnaire. The responses yielded demographic information serving a contextual purpose for the analysis of the general learning behaviour of ethnic minority students in face of demands on learning and demands inherent in the decision-making process for higher educational and occupational pursuits as influenced by the cultural forces of the home and school and focused on evaluations of learning strategies applied

to accomodate their learning style with regard to their aspirations. The ethnic minority students' perceived learning style in reference to cognitive style (processing, encoding, storing, and retrieving information); affective style (attention, motivation, personality); and physical style (perceptual modes, energy level, time preferences, and environment), was examined.

## RESULTS

Generally, with respect to cognitive style, the results indicate that 78% of the ethnic minority students describe themselves as convergent thinkers, learning information by memorizing in a sequential order, separating information into parts, concentrating on details and facts and reflecting on a possible answer to a question before responding. With respect to affective style, 83% of the ethnic minority students describe themselves as intolerant of ambiguity and of distraction; 81% describe themselves as being subject-oriented; 87% describe themselves as practical, cautious, and persistent learners; 83% perceive themselves as reserved and cooperative; and 84% refer to internal locus of control in accepting responsibility for their success and failure. With respect to physical style, 79% of the ethnic minority students indicate a preference to receive visual information (reading/viewing) and 76% to express themselves visually (writing). The learning environment in which 72% of the ethnic minority students describe as being

ideal, comprises of a well-lit room, with comfortable desks set in a circle, with alternate periods of individual and group work.

Briefly, 82% of the ethnic minority students reveal a learning style profile of field independence; 77% indicate a low tolerance for experiences that vary markedly from reality, from the ordinary or even from the truth; 89% conceed to reflectiveness to provide appropriate responses; 91% claim high persistence to complete tasks; 86% report high anxiety affecting performance when faced with difficult tasks; and 81% accept responsibility for their success and failure.

In exploring the general teaching and learning situation in their class, 71% of the ethnic minority students observe that their individual learning style is not accomodated by the teaching style of their teachers in that the teaching style does not adequately facilitate their learning. In terms of a general learning profile, 78% of the participants describe a convergent cognitive style with 72% preferring to be reflective thinkers concentrating on details although 69% report that teachers encourage them to be divergent, more impulsive thinkers to be able to look at the big picture. While 67% of the ethnic minority students indicate that a teacher-centered style is preferred, 58% report that they cannot cope with the learner-centered teaching style offered at school, and 66% report experiencing uncertainty about organizing and being responsible for their own learning.

Generally, 62% of the participants perceive teachers to be too permissive in class in the sense that teachers considered to be authority figures do not match the authoritarian

parenting style accompanied by the expectation of strict obedience that 92% of the ethnic minority students experience at home. Inability to adjust to the competitve orientation of their school is reported by 68% of the participants, as 54% claim that competitiveness increases anxiety and 52% claim that it seriously affects academic performance. Moreover, 77% of the ethnic minority students indicate that internal motivation to succeed is emphasized at home and in their ethnic community than at school and is carried over to school more so than external motivation.

The teaching style of their teachers is judged by 74% of the ethnic minority students not to be an accurate match with their individual learning style, in that learning and teaching styles are rationalized by 78% of the ethnic minority students as a conflict of behaviours which perhaps are laden with cultural referents. Furthermore, when evaluating their classroom experiences, 83% of the ethnic minority students conceed that teachers appear to perpetuate sex-role stereotypes as these stereotypes appear to be most apparent in teacher expectations of student classroom behaviour and participation in that 88% of the female participants report they are viewed as more compliant/cooperative and 91% of the male participants report they are viewed as less competitive than their classmates not from ethnic minority backgrounds. Generally, 61% of the ethnic minority students rationalize that teachers believe that the projected sex-role stereotypes are perhaps more so in keeping with the cultural norms of the ethnic minority students' communities than with the school culture or the culture of dominant society.

Moreover, the teaching strategies intended to facilitate learning are observed by 76% of the ethnic minority students to be inappropriate to their individual learning styles. It is further observed by 83% of the ethnic minority students that learning strategies are not explicitly taught through their high school studies in that teaching strategies utilized in class are not easily recognized or differentiated by 77% of the ethnic minority students.

In an attempt to date their inventory of explicitly taught and effectively acquired learning strategies, 89% of the ethnic minority students indicate the elementary school period. Of further consequence, 87% of the ethnic minority students report that learning strategies utilized are not inventoried and 83% report that learning strategies are not evaluated for appropriateness to the learning tasks in high school. Ethnic minority students although able to illustrate their learning style profile, 76% indicate that they cannot themselves apply appropriate learning strategies to favourably influence their learning in high school.

Furthermore, with reference to the framework of Weinstein and Mayer (1986), 89% of the ethnic minority students conceed that they could apply basic rehearsal strategies (repetition of items in ordered list); 81% could apply complex rehearsal strategies (copying, underlining, shadowing); 72% could apply basic elaboration strategies (forming mental images, forming phrases from word pair associations); 51% could apply complex elaboration stategies (paraphrasing, summarizing); 64% could apply basic organizational strategies (grouping into categories) 43% could apply complex organizational strategies (outlining a passage or creating a hierarchy); 37% could apply comprehension monitoring

strategies (self-questioning or textbook questions to check understanding); and 22% could apply affective and motivational strategies (reducing external distractions when studying, directing attention away from fears of failure) in order to facilitate their learning.

## CONCLUSION

Given the general learning style profile of the ethnic minority students of this study, and the apparently incongruent match of teaching and learning styles, optimal learning and optimal evaluation of learning appear to be seriously compromised, presenting an adverse illustration of the educational situation that is inconsistent with recent research findings, which indicate that learning style preferences when accomodated, do enhance academic achievement, attitudes and behaviour (Dunn, 1984), and that in evaluating learning, teachers who identify educationally relevant individual behaviours and who consider that although cultural values are relative, cultural values nevertheless can and do influence students' learning styles and teachers' evaluation of them (Hernandez, 1989).

Basic learning strategies alone appear to be insufficient for effective learning at the high school level given that a developmental progression (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986) is associated with learning strategies. Indeed, 69% of the ethnic minority students evaluated that they do not have effective learning skills needed to become confident and successful learners. However, regardless of the report of insufficient knowledge of learning strategies, 85% of the ethnic minority students hope to realize their educational

and occupational aspirations, in that they would pursue higher studies. More specifically, 52% of the male participants are hoping to fulfill education requirements for a professional occupation while 78% of the female participants are hoping to secure employment requiring minimum educational qualifications in spite of reports of higher academic performance in comparison to their male classmates of ethnic minority background.

Perhaps, teaching students how to learn, how to remember, how to think and how to motivate themselves would bring about behaviours and thinking skills which facilitate how information is processed. More importantly though, it is not only the due consideration of individual personality and cultural value differences along with the development of appropriate teaching and evaluation strategies but the provision of learning material and learning strategies in a way that will be best received and best utilized to ensure the realization of aspirations and to empower ethnic minority students at school and in society.

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